

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL THOMAS
MCGRATH, COMMANDER, AFGHAN REGIONAL SECURITY INTEGRATION
COMMAND-SOUTH, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM AFGHANISTAN TIME: 8:30 A.M.
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Colonel
Thomas J. McGrath, welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable. Colonel McGrath is the
commander of the Afghan Regional Security Integration Command-South, out of
Kandahar, Afghanistan. Is that correct, sir?

COL. MCGRATH: Yes, that's it.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

COL. MCGRATH: We're here. (Chuckles.)

MR. HOLT: Do you have an opening statement for us?

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah. I'd just like to welcome everybody, and I
appreciate everybody taking the time to come and talk to us. I know it's --
think it's early in the morning over there -- I'm not sure -- or late at night.
I'm -- it's 8:30 in the morning. Okay. You guys fought the D.C. traffic or
wherever you had to get through. So I appreciate it.

I have great faith in blogs. Matter of fact, I've told my PAO to
establish one, which he has. And I've told him to communicate through the
blogs, because I believe that blogs are getting the right stories out there.
And we don't need to use -- we need to use all media, if possible, but don't
just focus on one certain group.

And so I'm really happy to be here, talking to you all -- (inaudible).
A lot of your blogs -- unfortunately for us, they black out a lot of blogs over
here. So I haven't been able to do my reading for the last couple of months.

So I just want to say that we're very happy that you're here. We do
have a story to tell on all the good things that are going on here in
Afghanistan.

There is a fight here. We're down here in Kandahar, which is about 350
miles or so west of Kabul. The Taliban are very active. Kandahar is the old
holy city. That's the prize. They'd love to get their hands on that. I think

that it would destabilize the rest of the country and the government if they did.

They're very good at asymmetrical type of operations, hitting and running, a lot of SVBIEDs, pressure plate IEDs, rocketing and things of that nature. Then they scoot, run off.

However, they are a vicious group. They don't think twice about beheading people, bringing -- when they get into firefights with our forces, it is to bring in civilians, put them inside of their defensive network, kind of try to suck coalition forces in to bring in heavy weaponry and therefore killing these civilians, which will only bring up some bad (IO ?). And they'll multiply it by 10 to 20.

We had an incident a couple of months ago where they said there was about a hundred that were killed. In fact, unfortunately, it was eight, but they had forced them into the trenches, and when they brought in heavy ordnance, killed about -- well, it turned out to be eight after a very, very thorough investigation. So we're fighting a crafty foe here, a very vicious foe.

However, really interesting -- we're getting some word that they're going "Taliban lite," as in L-I-T-E, Miller Lite. They're coming back and saying, "Well, TV's not too bad. Schools aren't too bad. We're not the same Taliban that you saw back in the '90s."

However, they go off and do the same things that they've done before, which the day this came out from Mullah Omar, they had a suicide bomber hit a family coming back from a picnic just west of Kandahar and killed 14 people. So these, to me -- they are fighting aggressively, but I think they're making a major push towards the -- before winter comes -- you still there?

Q Yes. Yes, sir.

COL. MCGRATH: Okay -- making a major push before winter comes and trying to gain some ground and trying to gain some IO victories, if you will, so that they can go to ground for the winter and then tell the people of the region, hey, we have freedom of movement inside of Kandahar and other provinces and inside with the Taliban.

However, the people are looking at us coalition forces as the solution to the problem, not the source of the problem. However, it's tenuous at best, because if you understand, the Afghans are, you know, caught between a cross-fire for the last 30, 40 years, and they're constantly in the middle of a fight, and many of them just want to, you know, survive.

However, we've been able to get out to see the people, use our CERP money -- the Commanders Emergency Response Funds -- to assist in building of roads; schools; economic development; village, medical outreach programs -- very successful. In the last three months, we've seen over 4,000 people -- men, women and children -- specifically as important with women -- I think in a counterinsurgency fight, which we are in, you have to look at, you know, the center of the family as the center of gravity. And the fact that they're bringing their women to these medical outreaches and things of that nature is a sign of success for us, because now we're taking care of them and taking care of them and their children, and we're very happy about it and we're getting a lot of good feedback from that.

Now, this is a long fight. It's not going to end any time soon. However, we're being very aggressive in our role as the Afghan Regional Security Integration Command in making these things happen, because, as usual, the U.S. brings a lot to the table, a lot to the fight, and one of the things is money. In a counterinsurgency, it's about 80 percent non-kinetic and about 20 percent kinetic, and we have some very aggressive people out there who are doing things in the non- kinetic arenas that are proving to be successful, and I'm really proud of that. Now, the Afghan Regional Security Integration Command was brought about about three months ago, approved by the secretary of Defense, and then we needed a(n) integration cell that would be the bridge between the regional command and Task Force Phoenix and CSTC-A, which is Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan, by Major General Cone. Task Force Phoenix, which is the resource provider, which is led by Brigadier General Livingston -- and most of his guys are out of the 218th National Guard, South Carolina, a great group of folks.

Fortunately for me, I came in country. I'm an active duty officer. I was going somewhere else, and they said, hey, would you like to command this organization? And to me, to command anything -- no problem. I came down on the airplane and put this thing together.

We built a bridge between us and RC-South and -- to ensure that the police training and the army training is integrated with the regional commander's operations.

And we were a brand new organization, started up, I mean, with just a couple of guys. And we're building as we go, learning every day as we go. But what we're able to do is get the police training and the army training in more of a structured format, more long-term set format that we see back in the states and other nations, so that they will have a long-term enduring capacity.

The police -- we've only been doing that for a couple of months. I have a number of police teams out there working with the police officers. The army's been going at it, the training, for a while, a couple years now, and doing extremely well. We do have some, you know, a long way to go so that they're conducting independent operations and -- but they're very aggressive, very motivated.

They're led by, I'd say, some real heroes in Afghanistan -- men whose -- if -- whose lives are on the line on a daily basis. They make a wrong turn someday, they're going to be dead, but they go out there every day. They travel about the region. They're leading from up front, and I'm really proud to be around such great people as this -- (name inaudible) -- who is the regional chief of police in Kandahar, and -- (name inaudible) -- he's the 205th corps commander. They've been in -- fighting in Afghanistan for a long time but they just have this very positive way of doing business. They want to do better. They want to improve and they want to improve the lives of the people.

When we go out to the different areas with them, and they talk to the shuras and the gatherings of the elders and the tribal leaders, that's what they talk about: how life can be better in Afghanistan through the building of hospitals, roads and economic development, and that we need to have the rule of law, not the rule of the gun. And so it's people like that that give me a lot of optimism and make my job a little bit easier, not too much but a little bit easier. Because this is a tough place, tough conditions.

I've got American soldiers spread across the region over a couple of hundred miles, living in very, very hard conditions. But I like to think my men and women are very hard and very tough. I tell them, you've got to live tough to be tough. And these guys fight alongside of the Afghan army and the Afghan police on a daily basis, and they're standing up. And they're from all components. They're from Army, Navy, Air Force; they're from National Guard and regular Army Reserves, retiree recalls. These guys have come here to train, to fight when they have to, and they're extremely dedicated.

So that's pretty much a rollup of who we are and what we're focusing on. And I'm more than happy to take any questions.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, sir.

Andrew Lubin with ON Point, you were first on the line, so why don't you get us started.

Q Great. Colonel, Andrew Lubin from U.S. Cavalry ON Point. Thank you for taking the time to talk to us this afternoon. What kind of cooperation are you getting from the locals in your area, sir? I know down in -- the basis of the comparison, I guess, is the Sunnis down in Iraq who are doing a great job in Iraq now (taking care of ?) AQI. Are you getting that same type of cooperation?

COL. MCGRATH: We're starting to make the inroads with these folks. They're pretty shy right now. We do get intel, but I don't want to go into too much detail.

The Taliban are very aggressive, very, very vicious type of people. So the people are waiting for us to make our moves down here, and we try to gather a lot of intel through the various outreach programs that we have. And we do get some, and -- but they're -- I guess the best term, Andrew, is they're gun-shy right now. Are the Americans going to -- is the coalition going to stay? Are we going to be here for the long term?

The police, who have a terrible reputation prior to this -- are they going to be there to help us? Are we going to have the rule of law? So we're still working on them. We're still getting -- and we're using the big carrot -- when you use the carrot and the stick -- we're using the big carrot in saying, listen, if you come to us, we're going to give you some good stuff. We're going to give you roads, that kind of development, schools, medical care.

And the theme that we take out is what has the Taliban done for you? All they've done is come to your villages, foreign fighters -- most of the Taliban now are foreign fighters; I failed to mentioned that -- and that tells you something, that the locals aren't too keen about, you know, running this crazy war over here against the government, so they're bringing in a lot of foreign types who they don't like. And they're coming into their villages and they're using their -- taking their food, you know, living in their houses, running their operations from these villages, and the people don't like them. But we need to bridge a little better in getting that out to them, the -- you know, the CERP programs and the security so that they start coming to us. I see that happening. We've had some good takes in -- just in the last few months, but we need to exploit that more. Q If I could follow up quickly.

COL. MCGRATH: Okay. Sure.

Q When I was out with Task Force Phoenix out in the east, the Taliban is predominantly Pakistani.

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah.

Q The Afghans hate them; I mean, they -- from the Duran Line down, they just despise them. Aren't you able to capitalize on their overall dislike for the Paks?

COL. MCGRATH: Yes, we are. And they -- we get a lot down here, too, and they don't like them. They get Chechnyans also and all other kind of Islamic extremists, and we do. The problem is they are -- they're going to go -- whoever has the gun who's in their village. And I think as we start spreading out and improving the quality of the police -- a lot of the police here previously were pretty much revenueurs, if you will. They set up checkpoints alongside the road and just rob the people, so the people had absolutely no trust and confidence in them at all. They were paid very poorly at the time. However, we've got plans to increase their pay. We're increasing their training; they're starting to come along very well -- very proud, cohesive units. They've still got a long way to go.

So when we can expand that inkblot thing -- if you can imagine that -- I'm sure you guys have heard of that term -- and start pushing out in key districts and then going out further and further and just pile on that, we'll be able to get more intel.

And the quality of training that we're giving these guys through the coalition forces, primarily Phoenix, U.S. Army, and some DynCorp contractors on the policing side is paying off. But it's a long process, and it's just something that we have to stay on. We can't -- you know, we have to focus where there's friends, friendly districts, and then based on their training and then just start pushing out incrementally. And that's what we're doing now.

Q Great. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Grim with Blackfive.

Q Good morning. This is Grim of Blackfive.net.

COL. MCGRATH: Hey.

Q I wanted to ask you a question about air support and its role in your area. Can you give us a sense of whether you're getting enough air support and to what degree it's coming from U.S. versus coalition forces, and any plans to sort of bring the Afghans up to speed on this too?

COL. MCGRATH: Yes. We get all the air support we need. Each of my teams has been trained back at Fort Riley -- my ETTs, my embedded training teams with the ANA, and my police mentor teams, who were all trained back at Fort Riley -- extensive training on CAS, close air support. And we use it during engagements. The same thing with medical evacuation.

We're able to get it when we need it, and it's been very, very decisive. We have some pretty tight rules of engagement on it, and I agree with them. We don't just drop ordnance where we feel like it; you have eyes on -- and make sure you have the target. We don't want to be dropping in, you know, where there's a lot of people and things of that nature, because we don't want

any type of collateral casualties and damage and things of that nature. But we get it from all of the coalition -- Dutch, Brits, U.S. -- and it's pretty plentiful.

And the training -- you know that we also have JTAC teams, tactical air teams.

Don't let me forget the Canadians either. Excuse me. We have these teams that are embedded, and it's been quite effective now on the battlefield. And it's brought in some, you know, pretty big casualties in the last couple of days, as a matter of fact. But I don't want to get into any operations.

Does that answer your question there, Grim?

Q Yeah. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Bruce McQuain.

Q Hey, Colonel. Bruce McQuain with QandO.net. One of the more successful programs going on in Iraq right now are with the Provincial Reconstruction Teams and the emergency -- are the embedded Provincial Reconstruction Teams. Have you guys got a similar thing going there? And how's -- what's that impact?

COL. MCGRATH: Oh, yeah. The PRTs are embedded inside of the region. We have them each area, and they've been going really well. Like I said earlier, we have -- I have the CERP money. They have money. I have USAID capabilities down there, United States Aid (sic; Agency for) International Development.

So what we try to do is integrate all of that money, so -- and focus on a certain project. We have some roads that are going to be built that are going to cost \$4 (million) or \$5 million out in the Kelat area, to the east, in the province of Zabul.

What we're going to do is -- able to hardtop several roads. That will reduce the IED threat. And we'll also be able to open up the eastern provinces, which are pretty much isolated, to more economic development. We've gone down to the border with Pakistan on Spin Buldak. We've brought money in there through the PRTs, my money and USAID money and U.N. money, to develop the roads down there, build a better border crossing, bring in cash money, cash-for-job type money, so we can put the locals to work.

So the PRT process is working extremely well. What I've told my guys to do is make sure that you're getting to -- with the PRT, and we have been, and that we sit down. We have a joint non-kinetic targeting board each week and we look at the projects that we can put together. And since I -- since the ARSIC is stood up, we spent about \$4 million and we have plans for another 5 or 6.

So very, very integral part of our plan here, that when we go into operations -- I call it all things COIN, all things counterinsurgency, that we just don't look at the kinetic part but we look at everything else. You know, the roads, the economic development, because you can gain intel from that. That big carrot makes a big difference.

And so people see that you're doing good things for them, and then they start passing information back. And they feel secure also, because we get the

police in there, after they've been trained, to provide security for that region. And they pass information back, and it's just a better environment, much more -- people are much more free to go about, live their lives accordingly. And you know, we're really happy with this.

It also -- what else we do -- we get with the elders, the tribals, so this has an Afghan face. And we get the police in there and, you know, we kind of stand in the background. And they talk to them -- what do you need; what projects do you need in your areas? And we're just there backing them up and, you know, we can put the money down.

And so far, they've been working really well. You've seen some major changes in this region, and I've got a lot of -- we have a very aggressive policy and programs for the next couple of months. As long as the money's there, we'll be spending it well.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Charlie Quidnunc.

Q Yes, Colonel, this is Charlie Quidnunc at the Wizbang Podcast. How are you?

COL. MCGRATH: Good, how are you doing, Charlie?

Q Just well, thanks. I have a question: The thing that's been in the news most about Afghanistan lately is the recent kidnapping and release of the South Koreans. Wondering if you think the citizens will look at that as a Taliban victory, to achieve their goal of expelling the South Koreans, or will they see through that?

COL. MCGRATH: I think they'll see through it, because they see that the Taliban -- a bunch of thugs, foreign fighters who they don't care for. But also they'll see that the Afghan army played a major role in this, in securing the area, and the Afghan police. I think they'll see through it and see that their government, their force, the security forces did quite well and, you know, got the release of these people.

I know we had two -- I think two were killed unfortunately. But I think the other 18 were let go, so I think that's a positive thing.

I don't know anything about the background, if ransoms were paid or anything like that. I just don't have that information. But I do think that the Afghan forces performed extremely well in securing the area, isolating it and tracking what was going on.

The police, the district police -- excuse me, the deputy minister -- deputy MOI, Deputy Minister Mangul (sp) played a major role in this, and he's up in the Kabul in the MOI, Ministry of Interior, and he performed, I think, extremely well to put that Afghan face on it, so I think they'll see through that. Okay?

Q Thank you. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Gerry Gilmore with American Forces Press Service. Do you have a question?

Q Yeah. Colonel McGrath, now, you've only been there -- the command is, what, three months old, you said, about?

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah, 60 days.

Q Okay.

COL. MCGRATH: (You let one go by ?).

Q Yeah, all right. So you're just starting to get some traction there. What is, A, your -- where do you see a lot of things moving, your greatest achievement? I know you just started. And what do you think's the greatest challenge, and how are you going to surmount that?

COL. MCGRATH: Well, the greatest challenge, I think, is the training part. We have to find locations so that we have the capacity to train large numbers of soldiers and police. One of the major -- now, the army's in good shape. They go through the Kabul Military Training Center. They have some pretty darn good facilities. The police are a little less on the resource side of things, as we just started focusing on the police.

However, we built some regional training centers in Kandahar and some of the provinces, where we bring them in and teach them policing procedures and things of that nature, led by the DynCorp guys. I also have contractors and PRI who train on the military decision-making process, and, yeah, that's right, we have to teach the police how to act militarily; I know that's somewhat controversial with some of the other nations, but these guys are the first line of defense. When the Taliban show up to come through their village, they have to be able to stand and hold, and to do so, they have to be well-trained, actions on contact, reconnaissance skills, you know, defense of a police station, regular infantry-type skills, be able to bring forces to bear and at a decisive point to defeat these guys.

But also we balance it with the policing part. Now, from what I see, there's not too much police stuff that you would see going on in the States going on here. I don't think they've ever arrested anyone for jaywalking or things of that nature. It's just different here; it's -- a lot of it's led by the tribes, and they handle a lot of their stuff. However, we still want to do that so they can develop into a much better police force.

So my challenge right now is developing policing -- police training that's integrated with the Afghan National Police, the Afghan National Auxiliary Police and the border police, and making sure that it's performance-oriented training, that it's hands-on training, and that it's a structured-type training, that we can bring them back to areas and sit them down in classrooms or get them out on the ranges. An that's what I do with my police mentor teams.

Q All right. So you're training like regional police down there, though, in the southern portion?

COL. MCGRATH: We help the local big -- yeah, they go -- they're regional, they're provincial, and they're district.

Q All right.

COL. MCGRATH: They're all over the place.

Q Okay.

COL. MCGRATH: So -- and that's very difficult, too. They're not used to that, this type of training stuff. A lot of them were brought in to be militia and things of that nature. And now we're weeding those guys out quickly and trying to bring in a much more professional force that can stand up to the Taliban and give the locals a sense of security.

Q What's looking up? I mean, that's a big mission, but it seems like you got your hands around it, your brain around it, as they say.

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah.

Q Well, what do you think? What's -- what do you see as something that's favorable? You said the villagers seem inclined -- they don't look at the Taliban as friends that much anymore.

COL. MCGRATH: Right.

Q You're seeing they're more amiable to the police and so forth now?

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely, where we have professional police. And you know, it's Afghan -- the terrain in Afghanistan is interesting, kind of looks like the Mojave Desert out there in California -- wide open swaths of land with a lot of mountains around them, very isolated villages and things of that nature. And it kind looks like Biblical times.

So people are separated, and there may be a few police down in that area. What I want to be able to do is, you know, get the training up for those police in the outlying areas, so that they're confident, competent police officers that the people trust in.

The good side of the thing is that we have some good programs going. We're going to start some here shortly, and we're going to do a complete retraining of the police, so that we're bringing it up to a higher level. And then we're incorporating some military skills but also policing skills, so they can hold against the Taliban.

We're also using -- we've also instituted some joint provisional coordination centers and regional coordination centers, where the -- they're manned by Afghan army and police, so that when something happens, the Afghans -- the situation report goes in through the headquarters into these centers, and we're able to build a better plan, so that the police don't go into a fight, you know, leading with their chin. And that's been working so far. We've integrated them along with the army into the task force -- forces. So we have a much more integrated, robust plan. And I'm really excited about that. It's working well.

You know, we've got a tough fight going on, but once we've pulled those three together and have a good plan, isolate the enemy and then come in and crush him, I think the people will see that these are forces to be reckoned with.

Q Thank you, Colonel. And thank you for the service, and good luck, sir.

COL. MCGRATH: Hey, thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: And any other follow-ups?

Q Yes, I have one, if we have time. Colonel, Andrew Lubin again.

To follow up on Grim's question about airpower, it's been reported back here actually -- I guess it's been in your papers also -- that it appears that there's almost too much use of indiscriminate airpower. Can you comment on all the civilian casualties versus putting boots on the ground in the different villages?

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah, I think, first of all, I know the stories that you're referring to are dead wrong. We don't just rely on airpower; we don't just stand back and let them bomb the hell out of a village or something like that. That is just absolutely wrong, untrue.

Airpower has been -- is used regularly. We have very strict rules of engagement. I don't want to get into those. However, they're adhered to. There are mistakes. It does happen. That's the friction of war, and I -- very unfortunate.

However, our forces are not the type to just stand back, like the Russians did many years ago, and bomb the hell out of villages and kill men, women and children. We wait until we have the opportunity. We use it when it's most appropriate and then -- and we use it well, in decisive effects.

But our soldiers know how to maneuver properly. They are brave, tough soldiers. They are not afraid of a fight, and same thing with the Afghans. We're here to defend freedom; we're here to do the humanitarian thing, programs. We're not here to beat the hell out of the Afghan citizens.

And frankly when I read that story, I was -- it was -- it caused quite a firestorm over here. It was just plain wrong.

Q Excellent, thank you very much. COL. MCGRATH: It wasn't -- it is not happening.

Q Good deal, okay, good to hear.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, and we're just about out of time. Colonel McGrath, do you have any closing comments for us?

COL. MCGRATH: Sure, I really appreciate you guys taking the time to listen to me rant here for 30, 40 minutes. I just want to let you know there is a fight going on over here. Coalition forces are doing very good. They're very aggressive.

I'm proud of these soldiers. I'm proud to command these trainers over here, trainers and fighters. I'm proud to be standing next to the coalition that's in Kandahar -- the Brits, Canadians, Dutch, Romanians. I'm proud to be standing next to the Afghan national police and the Afghan national army.

They're warriors. They're a warrior nation and they want to do the right thing. They want to bring peace to their country. They want to bring their country into the 21st century through schools, hospitals, roads, economic development. They don't want to be caught in this neverending circle of death,

murders and just creeping back -- not creeping back, taking huge leaps back -- into the stone age of living in mud huts and things of that nature. They want to do well, and I'm really proud to be part of this and seeing us moving forward.

We got a long way to go. War is tough, but every day we see progress. And I really appreciate you guys talking to us, because I think you guys are getting the word out to the American people in a straight fashion, without it being put in neat, certain -- certain political goals. So -- and that's why I ask my PAO, Commander Parks, to get me on this so we can tell the real story that's going on here, and I really appreciate your time.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, Colonel, and we hope to be able to speak with you again here a few weeks down the road so we can see how things are going. We appreciate you being with us today, especially. And Colonel Thomas J. McGrath, commander of the Afghan Regional Security Integration Command-South, Kandahar, Afghanistan, thank you very much, sir.

COL. MCGRATH: Hey, thank you, and I'll be looking forward to hearing from you. Thank you all very much.

END.